

I was a potted plant

Have you ever watched an aircraft mechanic at a party or a wedding in which he knew only one or two people, and the other guests were "professional types" on his wife's side of the family? He looks painfully uncomfortable, out of his element, just like how a man looks on his first visit to a proctologist.

Our mechanic becomes really lost when his wife volunteers to "help" the hostess in the kitchen. Abandoned by his bride, he just stands there, back to the wall, neck chafing against his too tight collar, wearing a frozen smile, and wishing he was somewhere else, doing anything else. As he looks at his watch, the second hand slowly skids to a stop.

After his initial, brave attempts at making small talk with people with perfect teeth fails, he retreats to the hors d'oeuvres tray and begins nibbling on baby carrots, celery stalks, and other green and red things that he cannot identify. As our hero is putting one of the unidentifiables on his plate, he notices something that betrays his occupation to the rest of the guests.

As a reflex action to the rising insecurity growing inside of him, he does something that many people would consider quite unusual - he attempts to hide his hands.

Yes, his hands. His rough, thick, callused hands - the ones with white, scarred fingers, a blackened fingernail and a Band-Aid®-wrapped digit. They are either stuffed in his pockets, or worse, hidden behind his back.

Not knowing what to do or even what to say, our mechanic stands there, alone, and knows he is out of his element, while thinking these people were all smarter than he. After all, he heard from his wife that they were all college graduates, so their hands were soft. So, he hides behind the self-taught lie that he was "just an aircraft mechanic," not smart enough to pour water out of a boot if the directions were written on the heel. He is now doomed by chance to be in the company of his betters. So, for the next three hours, he says nothing, assuming the duties of a potted plant until the evening grinds thankfully to a halt. On the way home, he takes his pent-up frustration out on his wife. He has a fight with her over something stupid, and he winds up sleeping on the couch. Does my personal story sound a bit familiar? Has it ever happened to you? What is the real problem here? Is it my hands or the lack of confidence in my own abilities and accomplishments? In my case, I found out it was the latter.

Before I get to the sum and substance of this little article, let me tell you what triggered this piece about earning a college degree.

During the first week in August, I gave a maintenance presentation to approximately 32 mechanics, first level supervisors, and quality control folks. They averaged about 12 years working for their company - a large repair station with a great reputation for excellence. Just that week, they got the news that they were being bought out by another large aviation company, and concern for their individual futures was written deeply on their faces as they sat in front of me.

Noting their apprehension, I decided to build on my last block of instruction in my 3-hour course, a segment called professionalism. In this section, I stress the importance of professionalism in our business and how our professional values and principles can be put at risk. One of the last things

that I discussed was getting additional technical training, like avionics, or NDI, and a college degree based on experience earned, and challenging college courses for college credits.

I was selling an idea. I told them that chances for promotions in this ever changing aviation environment depends on having something better than your competitor. I finished my little pep talk by saying that getting a college degree was perhaps one of the best deals going, and it can open doors for promotions that would be forever closed without the piece of paper that certified you as being smart.

The sales pitch did not seem to hit the mark. These mechanics were arguably working for one of the best repair stations in the country. Their collective body language from the majority of them yelled: "We had a good job, so why go back to college in our thirties?" But, I also heard from one or two of them: "Don't you know O'Brien, that only "smart" people go to college or don't you understand that I don't have the time or money to change my lifestyle?"

Back in 1982, I made a conscience decision to get a degree, because I recognized that I knew a lot about fixing airplanes, but very little about the world my customers lived and worked in. I needed to get a working vocabulary outside of the aviation environment. I needed tools to communicate ideas and process new information. That decision changed my life. So, on that August day, I got mad, not because of anything the mechanics did - I got mad at myself because their body language reminded me of an earlier version of me and the damn potted plant experience.

I was also mad that the industry-wide, false concept that mechanics were somehow not smart enough to go to college, was still alive and well. I was mad that even one of us thought that a mechanic was intellectually unable to reach the same level of respect that the public gives other professional career fields. For the next 20 minutes, the poor mechanics were treated to an unscheduled sermon from Father O'Brien.

Looking them in the eye, I said that getting a college degree is not for everyone. A good life should not be determined by a simple piece of paper. However, for those who ever thought about going to college, there are ten truths that you must buy into first before you even consider getting a degree. The first truth is that you are not the pimple-faced kid you were when you were in high school, or even the military. You are smarter and hopefully better looking. I reminded them that on the other side of this wall, you work on aircraft costing \$35 million plus! The very work you do is highly technical in nature and your every action determines safety of flight. Very few colleges prepare their graduates for the responsibilities that the work that you do demands on a daily basis. Even if you never see the inside of a college, I want you to never, ever, again call yourself "just a mechanic," even in the private world of your own thoughts!

The second truth is, do not equate the amount of education with a higher intelligence. Some of the dullest people I have met in my life had a PhD. If you graduated from an FAA approved A&P school, you were subjected to at least 1900 hours of training, (a 4-year college degree of 127 credit hours is 1680 hours), covering 43 subject areas, and you had to pass 9 Federal Aviation Administration exams. I am not aware of any 2- or 4-year college degree that even comes close to requiring the number of courses that an A&P must successfully complete.

The third truth is the sad fact that our industry, like many other industries, places more credibility on a piece of paper - a college diploma - than on what knowledge a man or woman has learned through experience. So, one is almost forced to get a degree to be promoted. If it helps, think of college as a rite of passage.

The fourth truth is, in today's world, you do not have to go away to college to get a degree - you can get a degree working from your own home. And, there are over 500 colleges to choose from. Five hundred opportunities to excel.

The fifth truth is that if you have an A&P certificate, you already possess over half the credits for a 2-year college degree.

The sixth truth is colleges and universities are businesses, and students are their customers. All you have to do is find the right college for your needs and bank account. Everything is negotiable, and don't be fooled by the propaganda that an individual college is concerned with your welfare and personal growth. Trust me, all that nice, warm and fuzzy talk will disappear in a heartbeat if you miss a payment.

The seventh truth is motivation, not money or time, but motivation is what you must have in abundance to start, and more importantly, motivation is what will carry you to finish a college degree. Your family's support is the next biggest factor in accomplishing your goal.

The eighth truth is to deal only with accredited institutions. Avoid diploma mills that offer \$500 college degrees displayed on the back of matchbook covers. Even in the 90s, you still only get what you pay for.

The ninth truth is getting a 4-year college degree will take anywhere from 18 months to 6 years. A two-year degree averages about 18 months to earn. Colleges, just like mechanics, are different. Do plenty of research up front, in order to reduce the amount of actual course time required to earn a degree.

The tenth truth is any college degree will markedly improve your vocabulary, as well as your reading, writing, and communications skills. Your mind will be stretched, and once your mind is opened to new ideas and information, you will never be quite the same again. But, no matter what degree you get, I assure you that your chances for promotion will improve, and, at the very least, you will no longer be forced into playing the role of a poorly watered potted plant. Let's get started.

The first thing that will hit you when you begin your research for what college offers you the best degree program to fit your needs is the terminology of academia. These folks have nine different words for everything. They call external degree programs by such names as non-traditional or innovative programs, alternative education, distance learning, faculty-directed courses, or independent study, to name just a few.

Make sure that you only deal with colleges that have been accredited and approved by a nationwide accredited association such as the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, etc.

When you boil all the blood and fat from the rhetoric, external degree programs give you college credit hours for education and for life experiences, earned outside of the formal college environment. Some of these external degree programs require classroom participation (residence), others do not.

One book that is usually available in your local library is Peterson's Guide to Distance Learning Programs (1998). In its 614 pages, it lists hundreds of colleges and universities that offer distance learning, along with fax numbers and internet web sites for the colleges. Another resource is Bear's Guide to Earning College Degrees Non-Traditionally, (12th edition, 1997). It focuses on 500 accredited schools and programs, has a separate and distinct section on unaccredited schools, and another section on disreputable organizations. If you have access to a computer, you can pull up other resources on the Internet by typing in <http://www.uwex.edu/disted/catalog/other.htm>

I recommend that you focus your research to target at least three accredited colleges that at least on the surface, can fulfill your needs. All three colleges will require you to submit a "portfolio" of your life experience and accomplishments for review. List your formal and informal education, and be prepared to back-up your claims. For example, your three-year tour in the military is considered informal training and qualifies you for three credit hours in military arts. If you presently operate your own business, or have operated one in the past, you may get up to six credits in business administration. Remember every college is different, so include everything in your portfolio such as awards, technical training, even your hobbies and participation in volunteer work.

Your portfolio is then evaluated by the college and usually for a fee that runs between \$50 to \$1000. I recommend that you send your portfolio to at least three colleges. Why? Because I guarantee that each of your life experience evaluations will be different, so while the initial up front evaluation costs would be higher, the added costs would be more than paid back if one of the colleges gives you a whole bunch more credits than the other two.

Additional information about these assessments is available through the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL, 243 South Wabash Ave. #800, Chicago, IL 60604.

Other assessment programs:

If you are in the military reserves, you can get either college credit or a degree for courses taken in the military or passing tests approved by defense activity for non-traditional education service. For more information, call them at DANTES (Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support), Pensacola, FL, Tel: (850) 452-1089.

College Level Examination Program, or CLEP is another way you can save time and money. CLEP is a national program that tests applicants in subject areas from Spanish to accounting. It will cost you up front to take a CLEP test that will average 10 percent of what the course would cost retail. If you pass a CLEP test in a particular subject area, you receive college credits for that course, saving both time and money. You can get more information on CLEP by writing them at CLEP, Box 6601, Princeton, NJ 08541 or on the Internet <http://www.collegeboard.org> and use the keyword "CLEP."

Regents' college examinations are another accredited organization that can offer college credit for life experiences based on passing a test. It is similar to CLEP. For more information, request the Regents College Examinations Study Guide by contacting Regents College at their website www.regents.edu; or by phone at (518) 464-8500; or write to Regents College, Test Administration, 7 Columbia Circle, Albany, NY 12203.

Once you have your college, life credits, and schedule lined up, believe it or not, the hard part is over - except for the part when you find yourself sitting in a classroom filled with young, over active, hormone-driven kids, and they call you, "Sir."

I must tell you that once you start, you will want to quit a hundred thousand times. You find that your free time will be replaced by studying and you learn once again the joys of cramming all night to take a test. It is especially bad in the morning after an all-nighter when you see yourself in the mirror and find yourself repeating over and over: "You are not as young as you used to be." What about the cost? Figure \$5000 for a two-year degree, and up to \$12,000 for a 4-year degree, unless you already have a two-year degree. There are so many college loan programs out there that money should not be a problem. Do not let the cost scare you off. An education lasts a lifetime. When you think that it costs less than half of what a brand new car or truck costs, it's quite a bargain.

Will a college degree be worth all the pain you will endure? I cannot say everyone would be better off in every case, but, I am sure that your family would be proud of you when you put on the black robe and the silly hat and smile for pictures and posterity. For me, I can say it was worth it, for you see my friends, on that graduation day, I got rid of the potted plant forever.